

## CITY OF BALTIMORE

WILLIAM DONALD SCHAEFER, Mayor

DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENTM. J. BRODIE, Commissioner  
222 East Saratoga Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21202

RECEIVED

FEB 29 1984

MARYLAND HISTORICAL  
TRUST

FEB 23 1984

Mr. Jerry Rogers, Keeper  
National Register of Historic Places  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

Subject: Parkway Theatre, *Baltimore*

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The City of Baltimore and the Maryland State Historic Preservation Office have determined that the Parkway Theatre located in an area of Baltimore City known as Penn-North Charles may be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The Parkway Theatre is typical of the grandiose design of fine movie palaces which were abundant in Baltimore at one time. It is one of the finest still standing, with a design said to have been based on London's West End Theatre.

A developer intends to rehabilitate the now vacant theatre to house up to 750 patrons and an adjacent property which will contain a restaurant, office and two lofts. The City of Baltimore has applied for an Urban Development Action Grant to assist in the development of this project. We understand that you have ten days to respond to this request for concurrence of our findings and look forward to hearing from you in that time.

If you have any questions, please contact Mr. Ronald Wilson, Assistant Grants Coordinator, at (301) 396-3447.

Sincerely,  
/s/ MARK SISSMAN  
for

M. J. BRODIE  
Commissioner

Attachments

Determination of Eligibility Documentation: Parkway Theatre

Historic Name: Parkway Theatre  
Address: 5 West North Avenue

Boundary  
Description: See map below; 65' x 115' lot, 65 foot frontage on North Avenue, 25 feet west of the southwest corner of North Avenue and Charles Street.

Date: 1915  
Architect: Oliver Wight



## Description

The Parkway Theatre is located on North Avenue near Charles Street. It is constructed of a mixture of light and dark textured brick with light gray terra cotta trim. A large projecting marquee dominates the central stone first floor area which features a panelled ticket window and double wood entrance doors. Show windows for announcements or coming attractions and double exit doors flank the theatre entrance. Egg and dart molding completes the first floor at the front facade. Above the marquee are three large multi-paned windows set into stone arches that feature a circular design at the top of the arch and emphasized console keystones. Supports for the marquee are located at the spandrels. At the recessed sides of the facade are two over two wood windows with stone sills and lintels on three levels. The building is capped with an elaborate stone **cornice treatment**. The name, "Parkway Theatre," is incised in stone just below a cornice featuring small dentils, egg and dart molding and large medallions. Above the projecting cornice is a blank stone balustrade and building cap.

The interior features an egg-shaped auditorium and a large ornamental domed ceiling. Although in a deteriorated condition, much of the interior decoration is extant.

## Significance

The Parkway Theatre is one of the finest older movie palaces still standing in Baltimore City. Architecturally it is primarily significant for its excellent interior decoration and unique egg-shaped auditorium. The exterior is a simple and dignified Italian Renaissance design. The theatre design is said to have been based upon London's West End Theatre. The Parkway was designed by Oliver Wight, a local architect, for the H.W. Webb Northern Amusement Company. It was built by the J. Henry Miller Company in 1915. The Parkway opened on October 23, 1915 with the exclusive showing of Paramount Pictures. Sound pictures in Baltimore were pioneered at the Parkway in 1917, but "talkies" would not catch on for another decade. The Parkway was also significant as one of Baltimore's early art theatres. It has been vacant since the mid-1970s.

PARKWAY (5 West North Ave.) The PARKWAY was designed by Oliver Wight, and built by the J. Henry Miller Co. in 1915 for H. W. Webb's Northern Amusement Co. It cost about \$120,000, and was modeled after the WEST END (later RIALTO) Theater near Leicester Square in London. According to one account (96), a friend of Mr. Webb, visited the WEST END Theater while on a visit to England in 1913. He was so impressed with it that he got plans and photographs, and sent them to Webb. Webb was equally impressed, and promptly organized a company to build the PARKWAY. The front of the building was described as simple and dignified. It was done in the Italian Renaissance style from light gray terra cotta with a mixture of light and dark texture brick. Originally, the marquee was a simple iron structure with no space for attractions, but it has been enlarged and modified many times since. Inside, the stage dimensions were: height 47', width 45', depth 11'. The auditorium was reached through a marble lobby with marble stairs leading from either side to a large lounge and tea room. The interior was furnished in the Louis XIV style. The auditorium was egg-shaped with about 1,100 seats originally. 800 of those seats were on the first floor. There was additional seating in the balcony, in a dozen loges and in two so-called "Royal Boxes." In 1931 the seating was arranged as follows: orchestra 546, balcony 382, boxes 14. The main colors were old rose and French gray. Later, buff predominated. The ceiling featured a large ornamental dome with a suspended sunburst. The chandelier in the lobby was a replica of one in the palace at Versailles, while the mezzanine lounge contained crystal fixtures modeled after those at Fontainebleau. Originally, the PARKWAY had a \$15,000 Moller organ. Additional music was provided by the orchestra directed, at first, by Sidney Seidenman. The PARKWAY opened on 23 October 1915 with "Zaza" starring Pauline Frederick. The exclusive showing of Paramount pictures was promised. The PARKWAY had its own cameraman who filmed local news items, and, within 24 hours, they could be shown in the theater's Topical Review. On 5 January 1917, after changes that required a year to perfect, George R. Webb's "singing pictures" were exhibited at the PARKWAY. (See above, p.22) In August 1926, a Wurlitzer style "F" (opus 1421) organ replaced the Moller. The Whitehurst organization, which had obtained the theater in the early twenties, sold it to Loew's in 1927. A year later, Movietone and Vitaphone sound units were installed. Nelson Baldwin was chief operator at the PARKWAY for many years. The theater was remodeled in 1939 at a cost of \$30,000. Morris Mechanic bought the PARKWAY from Loew's in June 1952, and, as he did with several other theaters, he promptly closed it. Don Swann, Jr. leased it for his Hilltop Players in October 1953, and it opened as a legitimate house on 23 November 1953. After two seasons, Swann had to give up. The building was vacant until March 1956 when the Schwaber organization took it over and remodeled it into an art theater--the FIVE WEST. The original seats were replaced by 435 Airflo Rocking chairs. There were two lounges. Imported coffees and oriental teas were served in the downstairs lounge, and patrons could view works of Baltimore's outstanding artists there. The predominate colors at the FIVE WEST are brown, beige, and green. The stage and proscenium draperies are gold, and the carpeting in hunter green. The FIVE WEST opened on 24 May 1956 with "The Ladykillers" starring Alec Guinness. It is still operating as of 1974. (Plate 20)

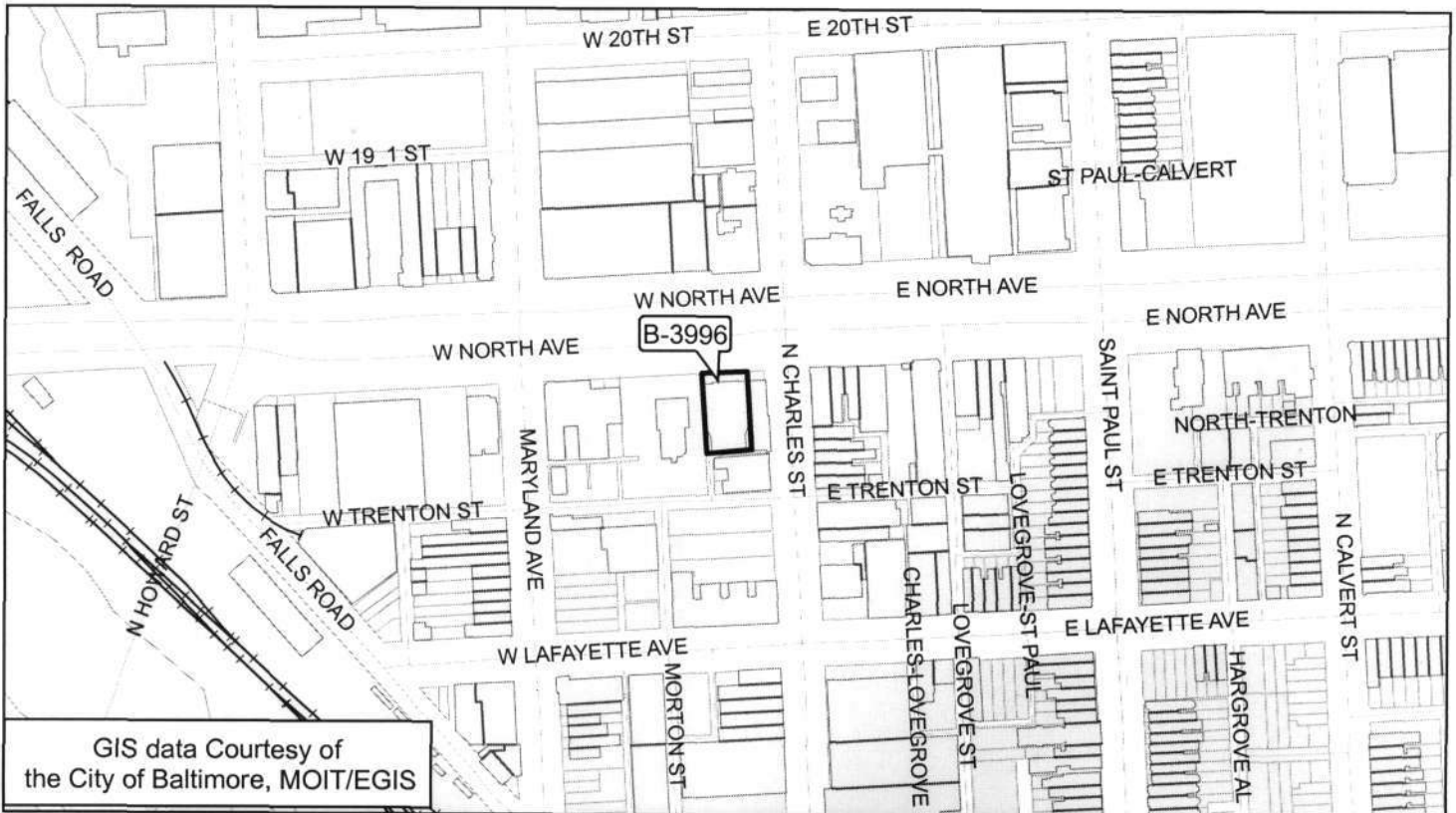
---

96. Motography, XVI:15 (7 Oct. 1916), p. 803.



Baltimore had a chance to get real talkies in 1917. George R. Webb, a financier and brother of the movie exhibitor Henry Webb, had put together a sound synchronization system for movies as early as 1910. His system, which incorporated inventions by John J. Comer, William P. Stunz, and Henry T. Crapo, was similar to Vitaphone and other early sound systems. The sound came from a record which was synchronized with the projector. The story is told that he got the idea for this system from a former venture in which musical programs were transmitted by phone to some 1,600 subscribers in Wilmington, Delaware. This idea in turn was one of many that came from the book Looking Backward 2000-1887 by Edward Bellamy. In 1912 Webb exhibited movies with synchronized music and some conversation in Paris. He later formed the Webb Talking Picture Corporation. On January 4, 5, and 6, 1917, Webb showed the second act of "Carmen," with synchronized sound, at the PARKWAY. Giuseppe Campanari, Leon Rothier, and Maria Conesta of the Metropolitan Opera were featured in Webb's film. The entire picture lasted for 20 minutes. At the time, Webb foresaw what has become a gruesome reality--political speeches lasting an hour or an hour and a half by means of talking pictures. As Webb explained the arrangement of his system in the PARKWAY, "All control of the musical end is operated now from the picture booth. The device, which is controlled by motor, is attached to the motion picture machine and is operated simultaneously with the showing of the pictures. The sound effect is converted to electric waves and carried by wires back of the screen. Above the screen are arranged a number of receivers, and at the PARKWAY Theater tonight there will be six of these receivers just above the screen, through which the mechanical sound will be transmitted to the audience. By the arrangement of levers the operator can instantly throw the sound device into perfect synchronism (sic) with the pictures. It has been arranged also that by operating the lever the sound can be kept in perfect harmony with the orchestra." (32) Later on, the complete operas "Faust" and "I Pagliacci" were shown at the LYCEUM Theater and the ACADEMY OF MUSIC in Baltimore. These two films are purported to have been the first synchronized talking films presented in the United States (33). Webb died in 1918, and his invention never gained enough support from the silent movie industry. His system was rediscovered in 1927 after talkies had captured the industry's fancy, and was demonstrated to a group of movie exhibitors from large eastern and southern cities at the AVALON Theater. Apparently nothing more came of it.

B-3996  
Parkway Theater  
5 W. North Avenue (now 3 W. North Avenue)  
Block 0388 Lot 011  
Baltimore City  
Baltimore East Quad.



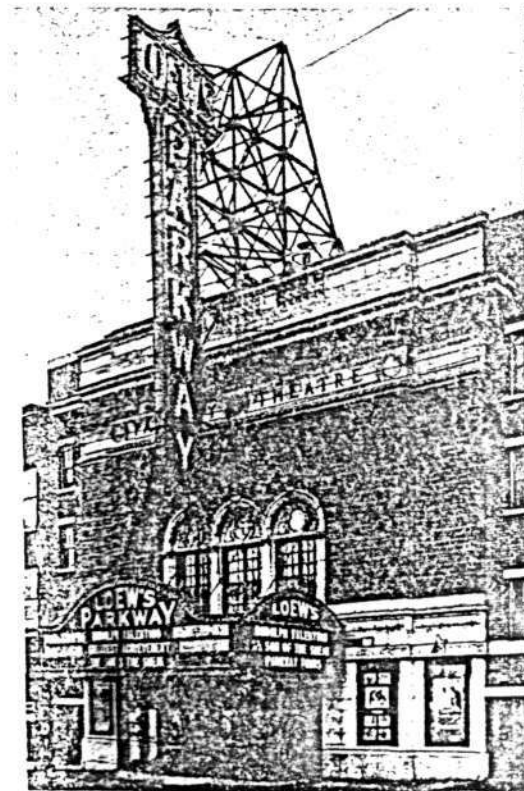
B-3996

Photographs of Parkway Theatre from Exit.

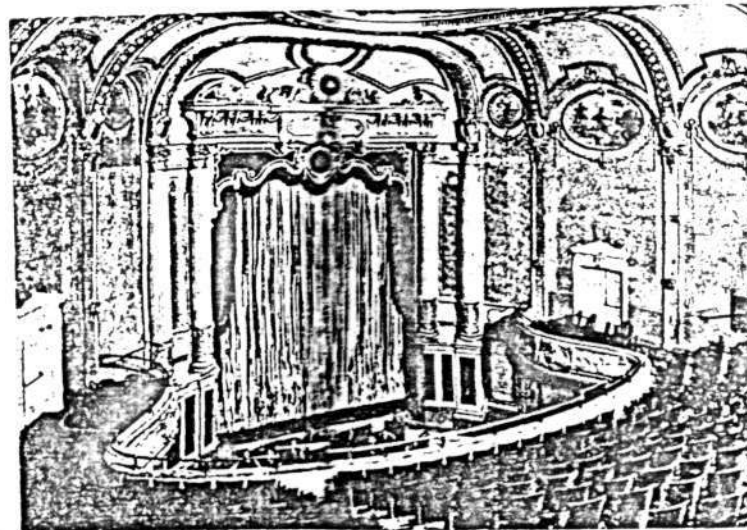
1. c. 1925 exterior
2. c. 1926 exterior
3. c. 1926 interior



1



2



3

B-3196



Photo reversed